Shrouded Talents

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Shrouded Talents

by On_a_Happier_Note

Summary

"You should know by now being the largest or toughest won’t win every battle. Your skills and expertise don’t exist in a vacuum; it’s used alongside others."
Armin's strengths aren't as obvious as his friends and they want others to appreciate them nonetheless.

Strength of Misconceptions

It was the beginning of the third day.

The last two days Mikasa had been sick and bed-bound, likely contracting a bad cold which had been going around the district. She was making a speedy recovery with Dr. Yeager giving her medicine, already feeling better than yesterday, but he'd told her to stay home one more day to make a full recovery.

While she wanted to go outside desperately, she also had to agree.

After she'd attempted sneaking out after Eren, only making it halfway down the stairs before sitting on them woozily, the Yeagers threatened to tie her to her bed if she tried again. She realised she had to recover before she could go outside again. But she'd also heard from Armin that the town bullies had been talking about Eren lately, annoyed at how he interfered with their quarrel with Armin. Likely noticing her absence these last two days, they were going to go after him, and soon. Their fear of her wrath would only hold them off for so long.

Hearing someone climbing the staircase, she glanced over to the doorway, only her eyes exposed between the snuggled mess of her scarf, nightgown, bedsheet and long, black hair. Dark eyes normally filled with a steady determination or soft edge, now dull and tired. They lit up slightly upon seeing Eren.

"Hey Mikasa, I'll be going out for a bit to buy some food at the market. But don't worry," he quickly added, "I'll be back soon!" Eren had made a valiant effort to stay home more and be with Mikasa after seeing how miserable she'd been stuck in bed. However, he still had chores to do, and she understood how much he liked going outside too.

"Okay," she responded morosely, knowing she couldn't persuade him to stay. "But be careful."

"I will." *He'd try,* she thought, but that wasn't very reassuring when factoring in the outcomes of some of his previous outings. With that, he gave her a quick wave before bounding down the stairs and after saying a short goodbye to his parents, she heard the front door shut with a resounding thud. At least it sounded as such to her.

Sitting up and leaning against the windowsill, she felt the horribly familiar feeling of hopelessness watching Eren through the window leave without her.

"Mikasa?" Carla's voice called from downstairs, "Armin's come over to visit you! I'll send him up now." Mikasa was surprised, although Armin had been visiting her daily through her sickness, he'd never come so early before. She wondered if he'd missed meeting Eren instead.

His quiet footsteps approached, and he gave a soft smile seeing her all wrapped up and propped against the window ledge.

“Hey Mikasa, how are you feeling today?”

“A bit better, Dr. Yeager says I can go outside tomorrow.” Armin noticed how her gaze wandered back out the window at that statement.

“Did Eren leave for the day not too long ago?”

“Yeah, sorry you just missed him.” Armin’s smile oddly enough brightened at that.

“I meant to. I came here to talk to you alone.” Now that had Mikasa’s full attention. His voice held his signature ‘I have a brilliant idea I want to share with you’ tone.

“Oh?”

“You know how I mentioned the local bullies have been eyeing off Eren recently? I just heard this morning they plan to make their move on him this afternoon.” Mikasa eyes widened at the statement. This was awful news, why did Armin act so casual at this?

“I have to go help him,” she concluded, making to untangle herself from the warm cocoon of bedding.

“No. No-no,” he repeated, pushing her back down into her pillows. “Not this time! I didn’t tell you this for you to tire yourself out! *I’m* going to deal with the bullies myself.” Though he said it so confidently, Mikasa couldn’t help but be more concerned. Now both of her friends were going to be beat up!

“*You’re* going to deal with the bullies?” She asked, failing to keep the incredulity out of her tone. Luckily Armin didn’t mind. “What will you do? There’s too many of them and I can’t help you right now.”

“Don’t worry, it’s what you’ve already done that will be essential to my plan!”

“I see your little girlfriend isn’t clinging to you today,” one of the local brats sneered. Even with his cocky tone, he nervously glanced around as if scared he somehow summoned her. “That’s just too bad.” Bag of food in hand, Eren glared angrily at the four boys blocking his way home.

“That freaky girl isn’t going to bail ya out this time!” Another jeered.

“Good riddance! She’s like a ghost haunting you Eren! Always quiet and her weird eyes and pale skin creep me out!” One added. Though the others all knew they weren’t scared of her appearance; more so that when she appeared, she pummelled them into the ground.

“I wouldn’t talk about her like that if I were you!”

“Oh yeah? What’re you gonna do about it? Sic Mikasa on us? If she were comin’, she’d already be here. Must’ve finally got sick of saving your weak cowardly ass.” This predictably enraged Eren further; comparing Mikasa’s strength to his was properly pushing his berserk button.

“Well guess what? I don’t need her help to-“ He cut off his own words as he spotted a flash of red, white and pink down the street.

Someone was running towards them.

Head down, face obscured by their broadbrimmed straw hat, dress billowing and arms trailing behind her, was Mikasa. Her red flats beating staccato slaps against the pavement, rapidly approaching the scene.

“Wha- It’s Mikasa!”

“She’s back?! But where has she been these last few days?”

“Who cares? Let’s get out of here!”

All four of them had scattered by the time she made it to Eren.

Mikasa was panting heavily, hunched over with hands on her knees, breathless from what should have been an effortless sprint for her.

“Mikasa! What are you doing out here? You’re sick! You should be home recovering and-“ At an uncharacteristic giggle, Eren paused mid rant to finally take a closer look at his saviour. Lifting the hat, he saw the blue eyes and button nose of his best friend Armin, spread in a victorious grin. “No way…”

“Did you see that Eren? I sent them all running!”

“I’m going to scare them off!” Armin announced, “If this succeeds, they will run away at the mere sight of me!”

“Armin, just tell me what you plan to do and how I can help.” Realising he was getting ahead of himself, he backtracked to his explanation.

“I’m going to dress as you.” She stared at him stunned. “If it’s okay to borrow your clothes,” he rambled, interpreting her speechlessness as disapproval. “If I can trick them into thinking I’m you, I shouldn’t have to do anything to help Eren other than showing up. Your reputation as his protector proceeds you.”

After a brief moment of contemplation, she came to a decision.

“Go ahead. It’s a great plan Armin.”

Grabbing her clothes and getting changed in the other room, Armin came back holding his clothes and set them by her bed to collect once through with his scheme. He was dressed in her usual outfit, with the addition of her large straw hat to hide his face. With their similar height, build, and skin tone, she nodded her approval; he very well could pull this off.

“I’ll go out and watch Eren for the time being, and wait until the last minute to rush in. The fight will need to look like it’s starting for them to fear me interfering. But if I arrive too early

before things escalate, they will see through my disguise. Timing it just right will be key. And I've seen you do this before, if everything goes correctly and I can mimic your running just right, it'll all be over before it starts."

"Thank you, Armin."

"It's the least I can do, you and Eren help me out all the time."

"We all help each other out. But this is still risky, you don't have to do this Armin." As much as she cared for Eren, she didn't want to risk Armin's wellbeing for his.

"I want to. And someone needs to protect Eren's protector every so often too." Mikasa gave him a faint smile at that.

"Mikasa, what did I tell you about leaving your room?" Carla chided, seeing her white dress running down the steps.

"Sorry Mrs. Yeager, I'll return these later, but I must be off now. It's for a good cause!"

Her look of absolute bewilderment shouldn't have amused Armin so much, but it was a sign his disguise could work.

"Mum you should've seen it! Armin singlehandedly scared all the bullies away!" Eren announced as he burst through the front door of his home. He deposited the groceries he bought on the dining table, Armin trailing shyly behind him.

"Ah, so that explains why I thought I saw two Mikasas this morning."

"Sorry about that Mrs. Yeager."

"No, it's fine, she explained to me what's going on. That was quite the trick Armin; you saved Eren and the groceries!" Eren felt the usual urge to say he didn't need saving bubble up, but seeing the look of happiness on Armin's face, didn't bother for once. "You two go on up now, I'm sure Mikasa will be happy to hear how things went. And," she added with a wink, "You might want to return her clothes before she wears yours tomorrow!"

Both boys hurried up the stairs leaving Carla laughing in the kitchen.

Misconceptions of Strength

Chapter Summary

In the barracks, in their cadet years, there's a retelling.

After another long day of gruelling training exercises, the boys of the 104th sat around some bunks idly chatting while unwinding for the night. While the others had already removed their uniforms and equipment, Armin had only just made it back from the final run of the day. Slowly taking his boots off his wobbly legs and unfastening his straps, he collapsed down beside Eren after the other gave a quick wave in greeting.

As the others mainly talked about their times, marks, scores and even a bit about their hometowns, Armin just rested in a slumped sitting position.

During the conversation, Jean had been watching Armin who was half asleep and tuned out of the discussion. He didn't know the blonde boy well, but he did well in the classroom, and Marco liked him, so he couldn't be half-bad. He didn't bother interacting with him often predominantly because their results were so different, they're rarely paired together to train, and most of all, he hung out with Eren.

And honestly that was the most off-putting reason.

It was just like how he couldn't understand Mikasa's fixation with Eren. How she always tried to help and support him regardless of their colossal strength difference (and his aversion to help). Eren and Armin had a somewhat similar dynamic, though Eren understood his want of independence and toned it down considerately. In comparison to the vastly stronger and more capable members of the Shiganshina trio, Armin seemed to be the weakest link though he seemed to be equally valued among his friends.

For the first time in two years, he wanted to hear Eren's opinion on something and in a true 'Jean' fashion, went about it in a blunt, mildly-insulting way.

"Hey Eren, for a guy always preaching about strength and becoming strong, and that the weak don't belong here, why do you hang out with Armin?" While Armin closed off at this, Eren looked genuinely shocked as to why he'd say such a thing.

"Well, *horseface*, for someone who preaches about playing it smart in training to achieve top marks, you don't seem to grasp the strength of intelligence and strategy. And even without all that Armin is a brave and loyal friend. He's not the strongest physically, but he's still here and trying his hardest. Likely harder than you," he added with a mocking side-glance. "And he plans on joining the Survey Corps. Even some of the strongest and bravest would never do

that.” Armin sported a light blush from his friend’s praise, in a military setting where athleticism reigned supreme, he sometimes felt useless and inferior compared to others.

Some of the other cadets must have forgotten Armin’s shared ambition to join the Scouts. Too focussed on the ‘suicidal maniac’ to notice his fragile best friend had the same goal with less chances of survival.

“He still plans on joining them?” Another cadet exclaimed. Somehow just noticing that Armin was present, aiming a steely glare at him, he backpedalled. “Uh, I mean, you’re brilliant and all, but you seem to struggle with most drills. You might not last a single expedition out there.” Connie seemed to agree.

“Yeah man, you’re tiny. You’ve even been mistaken for Christa, with your smaller frame and everything.” What Connie left out is that he was the one to mix them up. And, hypocritically, he was shorter than Armin himself.

“Just so you know,” Eren interrupted, trying to stop the others insulting his friend, “Christa might very well make the top ten. And you still don’t get it, in a fight against titans it’s the plan of attack that’s just as important as the attack, we need more people like Armin that actually use their heads. When I’m in a squad outside the walls, I’ll want Armin in it.” While receiving a rather emotional and appreciative look from Armin, thinking back on Connie’s comment about Armin looking like Christa reminded him of an event from many years ago.

“He’s used even his smaller stature to his advantage in a strategy before when he purposefully disguised himself as a girl.” *Eren! Don’t mention that now!* Armin thought desperately, his friend’s overeager defence turning embarrassing. The other cadets were all for this change in topic; there had to be a great story here.

“What?! Why?”

“To scare off the town bullies,” explained Eren, causing more confusion than clarification.

“How does dressing like a girl achieve that? Were they scared of girls?”

“No, only one in particular, Mikasa.” Now everyone, especially Jean, were giving Eren their full attention, this had to be good.

“Armin and me, we didn’t fit in well with the other kids in Shiganshina, but we looked out for each other. Because of our strong beliefs on certain things, many of the other kids would fight with us, but with so many targeting us, we didn’t often come out on top. This was until Mikasa joined the Yeager household.”

“Wait a second, Mikasa became part of your *family*?” Jean was aware they knew each other in Shiganshina, and that they were friends, but this?

“Mikasa moved in with us about a year before the wall was breached, but that’s another story.” *What!?* Jean thought, *Eren you can’t just gloss over that-*

“Mikasa was formidable even then. Her pink jacket was a sight that struck fear in the hearts of many. She’d come running, kick, hit and flip any in her way, and then tell me off all without breaking a sweat. Mikasa and me could keep all the other kids at bay, and they went after the three of us less.”

“Well, it was more Mikasa protected the both of us.” Armin added, not wanting Eren to get off dignity unscathed from this retelling.

“No way! They were scared to fight me!”

“More like they were scared of Mikasa’s retribution.” The others snorted.

“*Anyway*, it started with Mikasa being sick, and after staying home for a couple of days, the other kids saw an opportunity to gang up on Armin and me. I’d gone out shopping but got surrounded by the bastards on my way home. And just as things were about to get messy, Mikasa comes flying around the corner towards us and they all ran away scared. *But*, lifting their hat, I discovered it was Armin dressed as Mikasa who had come to my rescue.” While the others were expecting a weirder, more humiliating story, the funny, wholesome image of Armin saving the day was a great consolation. “So moral of the story; never underestimate Armin, he’s a resourceful and cunning individual whose intelligence has saved me in quite a few tight spots.”

After a moment of quiet where the group agreed and let Eren’s words sink in, they went back to their usual conversation topics whilst Armin sat up a bit straighter.

“You didn’t need to mention that Eren,” Armin expressed, bumping him in the shoulder. Sure, their bunkmates’ reaction hadn’t been negative, and Armin didn’t feel as embarrassed by the retelling as he’d expected, but there was still something there that made him uncomfortable. And it wasn’t the clothing.

“Why? They need to know how brilliant you are.” It always amazed Armin how his best friend could be talented at reading people one second, and oblivious to other cues the next.

“It’s still embarrassing.” Finally, it clicked to Eren that Armin felt he didn’t fully own that plan’s success. That Armin might be a bit too much like him and think that he must do things without relying on others at all to be strong. As if his plans and words mean nothing and it’s only the people listening and enacting them that are important. Like he was a sham and only good at getting help from others.

“No, it’s not, it was clever and calculated and used the resources you had available. You should know by now being the largest or toughest won’t win every battle. Your skills and expertise don’t exist in a vacuum; it’s used alongside others’. Like with fighting the titans we’ll never match their size and numbers individually but have to work together and play it smart.”

Armin was touched, but he and everyone else groaned at the last remark; trust Eren to find a way to relate anything to killing titans.

“Here we go again…”

“Eren you’re so lame.”

“G’night guys I’m not listening to another of his speeches.”

And with that, the group dissipated and returned to their own bunks, Eren and Armin going together to theirs.

“What you did back there, you mentioned titans on purpose didn’t you?” Armin’s question was more a statement. The raised eyebrow and side-eye cemented it.

“I just wanted to go to bed,” Eren conceded. “I do notice the looks people give me when I talk about certain things.”

“You *do?*” While his voice exuded sarcasm, Armin truly did wonder. After all this time, was his friend becoming self-aware?

“Ha-ha, I do actually learn a thing or two. Can’t let you do all the scheming.”

“Right then, let me know when you come up with something, I’ll let you dress as me and people might listen to you.”

“Hey!”

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